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Cognitive Growth Through Expressive Writing All That Jazz

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I want to develop jazz as a metaphor for growth. Jazz, generally considered, signals incongruity in music. Something happens where it was not originally to happen or where nothing was scheduled to happen—and nobody minds. In fact, the surprise—the incongruity—is the energy of jazz. In more formal terms, the creative impulse of the musician assumes power. He or she improvises between set notes, or in a void the composer leaves for such improvisational purposes. The musician is free to play, literally and figuratively. Each influences the other; they enlarge each other and expand potentialities.

Specifically, I am reminded of myself first encountering the work of Wes Montgomery. Through Montgomery's jazz I learned what form means to art—what form means to all knowing. Montgomery would re-create popular tunes on his guitar, tunes like *Eleanor Rigby,* tunes so familiar they caused reflexive toe-tapping, whistling, or shower-singing, but which had lost all their power and presence. One of his re-creations—*Willow Weep for Me*—revolutionized the way I thought about music. Like the narrator in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," "I listened as if in a dream to the wild improvisations of his speaking guitar" and felt Montgomery create a chimera of possibilities. Removing me from time and place, he filled simple phrases with

more notes than they could possibly hold, made individual notes into complete experiences, and turned a moment into a lifetime. I was overwhelmed with this incongruity. I thought, the tune is not that large; how could that simplicity inspire such genius? The end-realized potentials. *Willow Weep for Me* expands, Montogomery expands, Burnham expands. Growth. Jazz: the incongruous experienced and made familiar.

I start with jazz because I am not what I set out to be. My original purpose was to complete a hard-nosed, empirical evaluation of expressive writings's potential to promote cognitive growth. Along the way, however, my purpose was lost to a wild improvisation, a side-journey into humanistic psychology with its inscrutable gestalts and mystical intangibles. The empiricism and mysticism seem incongruous.

First, I accept as given the relationship between cognitive growth and moral development. I assume that higher order moral thinking requires highly developed conceptualizing abilities; i.e., Perry's "committed relativism" or Kohlberg's "postconventional" reasoning require the exercise of a complete range of cognitive skills, especially synthesis and evaluation. All else depends on this principle.

Originally I had connected some insights from the Perry Scheme with James Britton's theory of expressive writing as presented in *The Development of Writing Abilities* (11-18) (London: Macmillan Education, 1975) and combined these with the principles of collaborative learning as established by Kenneth Bruffee in *A Short Course in Writing* (second edition, Boston: Little Brown, 1980) to create a set of discrete exercises designed to foster cognitive growth. The exercises had inexperienced writers probing their pasts in the comfortable environment of expressive writing. The probing would allow writers to discover the sources of the values and beliefs which governed their current behavior. Such awareness according to Perry would ease transitions and promote growth. Expressive writing, according to Britton, allows the writer to function both as participant and spectator while making language. The writer *is* the audience and the purpose is to discover material—concepts, feelings—to integrate them within the self and to prepare the way for the process of shaping the material for larger, more distant audiences.

The fact that writers would use expressive writing to probe their

pasts derives from an insight gained from Perry's work. In *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development In the College Years: A Scheme* (NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968), Perry establishes a model of the intellectual and ethical development of undergraduates. Through a series of interviews completed over the four undergraduate years, Perry traces the growth of students from an initial dualist world view through a period of multiplicity to a relativist view eventually arriving at commitment within this relativism. Since my exercises were aimed at helping freshmen begin moving along the scale, I targeted the first two categories, dualism and multiplicity. As dualists, students live in a world of "we-right-good vs. other-bad-wrong." They cannot justify judgments nor evaluate them by reference to evidence. These students live in a whole without parts. Eventually, as multiplists, they accept a variety of points of view, but they are unable to evaluate or justify them. Such students find even the process of evaluation specious. To have an opinion is everyone's right. They cannot make generalizations. Every assertion, every point of view is equally valid. These students are prisoners in their own democracies.

These descriptions illustrate why such students should probe their pasts. The first step toward moving beyond dualism is to become conscious and aware of the source of the absolutes governing behavior. That source is the past and the influence of family, church, school, and community. Writing in an expressive mode about the past would allow students to dredge-up particulars in defense of their absolutist generalizations. Once students become aware of the particulars underpinning their absolutes, then they can begin to discover how generally flat these reasons are, and they can contrast them with more elaborate ones. Only then can they begin to challenge the truth value or utility of their existing views. The challenge will reveal incongruities and make possible the expansion or dissolution of current cognitive schemes in the light of new information or experience. Awareness precedes challenge precedes growth. Expressive writing serves as the instrument of awareness.

The collaborative learning element of the exercises derived from another Perry insight, namely, that most first and second category students suffer from "community shock." Having left the comfort of their sending community and having not yet been assimilated into the

new environment at college, these students often feel isolated and alienated. These are not characteristics which foster growth and learning; rather, they cause disengagement and retreat. The collaborative element of the expressive writing exercises was aimed at allowing students to form a community, the community implicit in any writing class based on collaborative learning principles. In collaborative exercises, students shared their insights about the past and discovered the foundations of their absolutes, the values and beliefs inherited from their previous communities. At the time, they healthfully and naturally discovered *diversity.* The other members of their writing community came from different backgrounds and value systems, even if the variance was only slight. Through collaborative learning exercises students discovered differences and that, while different, their peers were not murderers, monsters, or communists. Awareness of diversity precedes acceptance of diversity. Once pathways for questions and challenges are opened, then growth is possible. Me vs. them becomes us. Confronted with diversity within peer groups, students sense the incongruity of their previous beliefs and can begin the process of integration through the collaborative dynamic.

The theoretical soundness of this plan for growth based on expressive writing and collaborative learning exercises was borne out by early success. Completing these exercises in journals, students probed the past, discovered their values and beliefs, and shared them. The formal expository writing of some students moved from crimped, over-generalized absolutist writing to context-specific generalizations with relevant evidence and sound illustration.

In the same batch of papers, however, I would discover just as many examples of the same old spare absolutist crap. Examining these writers, I found that they did not balk at the expressive writing exercises. In fact, they reported positive reactions to them. I examined their journals and found early signs of awareness and growth, though these were not realized in their formal writing. Eventually, I explained this failure in two ways. First, despite their positive attitudes towards the exercises, these students could not assign a purpose to them. Second, students did not sense any relationship between one exercise and the next, nor between various subparts of the exercises.

The partial success of the expressive writing/collaborative learn-

ing exercises motivated a search for some solution to the problems of purpose and structure. Researching the problem of personal growth, I encountered, or reencountered, Ira Progoff's work with the Intensive Journal Program. He became my Wes Montgomery, the maker of incongruity. He ignored the caveats of the developmentalists who claim that growth is unpredictable and occurs naturally, that programs can establish environments that foster growth, but growth cannot be guaranteed or engineered. Rather, he uses expressive writing in a highly structured and purposeful program for individual growth. Comparing Progoff's striking metaphors for growth and his single-minded dedication to promoting growth with the guarded, almost equivocal assertions of the developmentalists forced on me an incongruity which I had either to resolve or dismiss. Ultimately, the approaches turn out not to be mutually exclusive; they can be synthesized.

Progoff's first contribution was establishing an overall purpose, a framework for the expressive writing exercises. That purpose is growth. He is concerned with growth in a holistic sense—growth through a whole lifetime. He is not interested in establishing an empirically demonstrable model. His aim is to describe a dynamic of growth incorporating "transpersonal" experience and depending on a transhistorical sense of time. For Progoff, individuals are members of the whole human community; the human community includes all who came before us and all who will follow. In this he follows Jung and the theory of the collective unconscious, the instrumental nature of myth, and the transcendent potential of all humans. He does not worry about literal precision and normative or prescriptive statements. He is overwhelmingly didactic and purposeful. He creates a program whose sole purpose is promoting personal psychological growth as he defines it.

Progoff's primary metaphor for growth especially informs two of his works, *At a Journal Workshop* (NY: Dialogue House, 1975) and *The Well and The Cathedral* (NY: Dialogue House, 1981). He conceives the individual as a well which is connected at bottom to an underground stream—the collective experience of the human species—and which shows itself as a stream running along the earth's surface—the experience specific to the individual. He devises an "Intensive Journal" through which individuals can sound the depths

of the well, discover their connection to the underground stream and in so doing establish a dynamic of growth based on the connection of the individual with the species, with the present continuous with the past and the future.

Progoff uses his expressive writing exercises—they are private writings addressed to the self and couched in telegraphic, image-laden language often incomprehensible to others—to move writers away from particulars, from the distraction of the everyday, and towards the symbolic. *In The Well and The Cathedral,* he calls his destination the depths of the self: "the transpersonal dimensions in the actuality of his own experience" (p. 12).

Despite the abstract and mystical nature of his aim, Progoff's Intensive Journal is highly structured and directive. Writers are presented a task and a specific procedure to follow to accomplish it. Writers are directed to persons, places, events, or things in the past or the present and instructed in how to engage them and what to do once engaged. In addition to the metaphors, the well and the underground stream, and the positive end, personal growth, the Intensive Journal provides a structure that informs its purpose. The structure makes the expressive writing manageable for the writer. In sum, Progoff presents a model for using expressive writing purposefully to achieve growth.

It is as a model that I approached the Intensive Journal concept. Borrowing from Progoff the sense of purpose and structure, I re-examined my expressive writing exercises and redesigned them into a coherent and systematic cycle, the Personal Development Journal, or PDJ. It is a 14-day set of expressive writing exercises in which writers systematically explore their present, probe and analyze their past, imagine and plan their future.

The PDJ breaks into four major sections including *Centering,* in which students write about the present, *Reminiscence,* in which students consider the past, *Cinema,* in which students project the future, and *Reflections,* in which students work through a series of probes concerning their experiences while working through the PDJ. The sequence of exercises aims at 1) establishing the immediate context, the now, 2) determining the various individual, parental, familial, and community influences that dominated the past, a past which continues to influence the now, and 3) projecting a future by creating scenes

which can be used to establish goals and plans of action to accomplish those goals. The cycle fosters personal psychological health and awareness, two factors many psychologists suggest are prerequisites for effective learning and intellectual growth. The PDJ two-week cycle puts expressive writing to work assisting the natural patterns of intellectual and moral development as established by theorists like Perry and Progoff.

In addition, the various writing tasks within the PDJ cause students to develop and practice cognitive skills required for higher order, formal writing. Each exercise requires writers to first discover a glut of information—details, examples, characters, etc.—through brainstorming a particular topic. Then they must select, connect, and combine that information into a formal writing structure—an extended metaphor, narrative, dialog, letter, speech, or myth. Finally, they review and abstract, summarize, and evaluate what they have written. Thus, each exercise involves writers systematically in creating, structuring, and finally evaluating material, the cognitive skills required of higher level writing/thinking. These skills are exercised, however, within the comfort of personal experience as the source of the material and the safety of expressive writing as the non-threatening stadium in which to practice. The exercises are designed specifically to force students to confront incongruities within their lives. Students first collect and construct a reality and then evaluate it against what really is or what they would want to be. If there is conflict—incongruity—students must assess it and establish directions to resolve the conflict. Students grow through the process. Students are motivated by a natural, perhaps innate curiosity about themselves and their futures. The framework of the PDJ gives them a manageable way to approach the topic. The appendix outlines the complete two-week cycle and contains the procedure for one of the exercises.

As I mentioned, the PDJ represents a redesign of the original expressive writing exercises. I have not had the opportunity to test the program extensively, but from the several classes which I used as guinea-pigs, I can make several statements. First, students are excited by PDJ. Despite it complexity and the demands it makes of writers, all students—including developmental, regular freshman, honors, and advanced—have been able to work through the cycle and most can

cite several important insights from the PDJ experience. Since most of these students are freshmen, it is interesting to note the frequency with which in the *Reflections* exercise, they will report that they considered the PDJ a "friend", found it an important "place" where they could go for solace, and found it an important instrument for "gaining a sense of control" over their lives. In addition, many report that they plan on completing the PDJ cycle again. I consider that a success in itself since it signifies that these students are sold on journal writing. If nothing else, the PDJ gives writers a comprehensive introduction to journal-keeping procedures and purposes.

In a more analytical vein, but not nearly so systematic that I can make serious claims, I discovered evidence of growth in the formal writing of the PDJ students. Generally, these students wrote better papers than I had been accustomed to getting. After the past-probing and the practice assessment and evaluation offered in the PDJ, students produced more complex and thoughtful, better structured, better defended and qualified, and more rhetorically sophisticated papers. All these are characteristics of higher level writing, and I discovered the PDJ students functioning in this range much more quickly than I normally do. These freshmen were writing papers of the cognitive and rhetorical sophistication of my sophomore literature students and my junior writers, all of whom had already completed the freshman writing sequence without benefit of the PDJ.

The results have been positive enough that I am planning a more controlled analysis in which several cooperating instructors will have students complete the PDJ cycle early in the semester and will collect samples of writing throughout the term. These will be compared with similar samples of the writing of students who did not complete the PDJ. In addition, the common exit essays of these groups will be compared to determine whether the PDJ has a measurably positive influence on the formal expository writing of freshmen writer.

I will have no grand conclusions to this project until the formal empirical evaluation is complete. I do sense that now that I have systematized the expressive writing exercises in the PDJ I have something testable. That alone signals progress. What I would reiterate now, at the end, is the importance of maintaining our own sense of openness to incongruity as teacher/researchers. We must be ready

to listen to the "wild improvisations" of Progoff and others who serve as the jazz musicians of cognitive psychology.

Appendix

(The following is an excerpt from the manual developed to support the PDJ. Students buy the manual and work through it as described below.)

The PSJ consists of a 14-day cycle of exercises designed to introduce you to all that personal journal keeping can do for you. In the cycle you will see the purpose of journal keeping become clear as you learn things about yourself you didn't know and establish some goals you can begin working to achieve. In addition, you will practice the procedure so thoroughly that you will have a complete bag of tricks to help you get started and keep writing—in a journal or elsewhere. The aim is to give you as complete and intense an experience as possible so you can subsequently continue to write in a journal systematically, irregularly, or not at all. You will leave the PDJ with a greater sense of self, an understanding of how journal writing can contribute to your sense of self, and with a journal keeping program you can use or adapt, as is your choice. Again, the key is to have choices.

There is rigor involved in the PDJ. You will need to find a quiet and restful place for each of the next 14 days, and you will need to find about an hour each day to complete these exercises. Following the cycle—writing one exercise per day and writing them in the suggested order—is crucial, for this your first time through.

Consider these exercises a type of directed free-writing. Your primary audience is yourself. Your concern should be with getting the substance on paper. Don't let mechanics or vocabulary or the conventions of writing interfere with getting the ideas down. But remember to take enough care with each exercise that you will be able to come back and make sense of it. An important aspect of the PDJ is a personal review and evaluation you make near the end of the cycle. Make sure you can make sense of what you will be going back to.

The PDJ is not evaluated by anyone other than yourself. If you are using these exercises in conjunction with a class, the instructor may

want to examine your PDJ for completeness and thoroughness. But you will not be evaluated in the sense of getting a grade. In addition, you may want to share some of the exercises with close friends who are also working through the cycle. If you are using these exercises in a class, your instructor may require this. There is also a good chance that you will want to return to the PDJ and use it as the source of more writing—for personal essays or starting places for transactional or persuasive essays. The PDJ is an almost boundless source of material for other writing.

The construction of the PDJ as a separate section of your learning log allows you the chance for privacy. Do not be intimidated or constrained by the possibility that someone will read your PDJ. If sharing is required you will have the opportunity to mask or edit entries. You have noticed that I have already included several examples of student writing in this chapter. These examples have been freely offered by writers who have completed the PDJ. They have had the opportunity to edit them if they wished (not to revise, only to edit), and you will have a similar opportunity if you are asked to submit the PDJ to an instructor or share it with peers. Having a sense of yourself as the intimate audience for this writing is crucial for the success of PDJ.

There are four separate sections in the PDJ. The first section includes the *Centering* exercises. They ask you to brainstorm all the sensations you have been experiencing lately, to distill from these a metaphor which describes you in relation to all these sensations, and, finally, to reflect upon the significance of these sensations. The *Centering* exercises direct you to your NOW.

The second section, *Reminiscence,* directs you to think and write about your PAST and what it means to you. You will write first about a place, then about a person. Both of these must have great meaning to you since this meaning will be the source of the energy which allows you to write the exercises. Next you create a dialog, something like a scene from a drama, in which you discuss your current life with someone from your past. Finally, you will write a myth or tall tale about your family or one of your ancestors. The point of the *Reminiscence* section is to make you aware of your past and the effect it has had on shaping your values and beliefs. Each exercise will end with

an analytic probe which aims at tapping the influence that the past is having on you. Awareness may lead to control, to making choices.

The third section, *Cinema,* invites you to write about your FUTURE. You will write a *Milestone,* an imaginative obituary, in which you present the major accomplishments of your ideal life and suggest their significance. You will write a scene in which you star as a successful young person who has achieved control and is enjoying satisfaction from living with and by conscious choices. You will write an "acceptance speech" which you will deliver when you receive an award of great distinction. Finally, you will write another scenario, this time as a successful and contented elder. The *Cinema* exercises allow you to project an ideal future, and, in the analytical section, ask you to consider whether these dreams are realistic and how you might start now to work towards accomplishing them.

The complete cycle of the PDJ is designed to help you ascertain where you are, where you have been, and where you would like to be. With this perspective of present, past, and future, you can assess your status, decide what roads you might want to follow, and start out. The final section, *Reflections,* will ask you to systematically review and evaluate all that you have done in PDJ. Its purpose is to make you focus, abstract, and draw some conclusions.

The PDJ is your invitation to the journey towards the self. Begin in high spirits, like Walt Whitman:

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading
I chose.

Overview	
The 14-day cycle of exercises follosw. You will receive complete directions, and, where appropriate, examples for each day's exercises.	
Day	**Exercise**
1	Centering One
2	Reminiscence: Place
3	Cinema: Milestones
4	Centering Two
5	Reminiscence: Person
6	Cinema: Youth
7	Centering Three
8	Reminiscence: Dialog
9	Cinema: Acceptance Speech
10	Centering Four
11	Reminiscence: Myth
12	Cinema: Maturity
13	Centering Five
14	Reflections

Centering: Day One

Based on an ancient Eastern meditative tradition, *Centering* is an exercise that can help you discover your present self. The source is a collection of 112 wisdom sayings, like proverbs, in which the ancient Hindu deity, Shiva, gives instructions to the goddess, Devi, in ways to perfect her control over her awareness and consciousness. Each proverb directs us to a new and fresh sense of the now while pointing toward the future. The *Centering* proverbs use the immediate to provide access to the permanent. They are collected in Zen Flesh, Zen Bones (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, n.o.), by Paul Reps, if you would like to read them as well as some other examples of Eastern wisdom.

The PDJ begins with an exercise derived from the *Centering* proverbs. But you will be using your own life context to probe and discover some wisdom. There are three parts to the exercise.

First, find a quiet environment without distraction. Close your eyes and relax. Clear your mind of all its everyday clutter. Once your mind is clear, take a sheet of loose-leaf paper write the date, time, and

place of the writing and title it *Centering One: Brainstorm.* Then, with your lens cleared by relaxing and freeing your mind, start brainstorming a list of the sensations you remember from this immediate period of your life. The list should include both the sensations and their sources. For example, "frightened—a new school, all these strange faces." Brainstorm until you have a substantial list.

Second, after brainstorming, take another sheet of loose-leaf and label it *Metaphor.* Review your brainstorm and select what seems to be the dominant sensation. Write it on the sheet and develop from it an image or metaphor which puts you in relation to your dominant sensation. For example, working from the sensation, "confused—new campus and people," one writer portrayed herself as:

a jackrabbit
frozen in the dark
in the center of a two-lane highway
headlights approaching from both directions.

Third, after writing your metaphor, take another sheet of loose-leaf and label it *Centering—SO?* Then freewrite about the brainstorm and the metaphor with the aim of becoming more aware of what you have been feeling lately and how it has affected you. Can you explain the source of your sensations in a two- or three-sentence generalization? Do you want or need to do anything as a result of what you have learned in this exercise?

Finally, staple these sheets of paper together and place them first in the *Centering* section of your PDJ. You will need them for further reference.